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Leadership competencies for project based school management success

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Abstract

Manager's leadership style influences the performances of every organization, process, activity or project. In the past 10 years, in Romania, the educational system faced important changes beginning with the decentralization, the transformation of schools into self-managing systems, continuing with stakeholder's implication in school management and the development of international project cooperation. In Romania, project based school management is a new concept for many schools, but in some institutions the manager's proactive attitude and vision settled the premises of a project-management culture. Our article examines the leadership competencies required for a successful project based school management. The analysis is based on the findings of a research conducted at regional level on a representative sample of secondary school teachers. Our research describes school teacher's opinion using a structured questionnaire approach together with constructed conversation with participants. The research involved 96 teachers from six schools. The schools involved in the research are developing an academic program based on technical or services education and the teachers included in the sample were coordinators or members in an international project team. The findings generated from our research emphasize that school principals need to improve the empowering procedure, to develop their vision and the ability to foresee the impact of changes.

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1. Introduction

Project management is common for many industries in different ways, from large infrastructure projects, to small-scale projects. Nowadays, more institutions are regarding project management as being mandatory for their survival and all the organizations that were opponents to project management are now advocates (Kerzner, 2013). In the educational sector, scholars, government experts and international organizations are searching for the best

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alternatives to improve the educational system and the projects as a constant preoccupation for the school management may represent an opportunity to overcome some major concerns like financing, curriculum and stakeholders implication (Ciobanu, 2013).

As stated by Rondinelli, since 1990 projects have been an “important tool for schools managers interested to increase training and improve the skills of young people and also an important tool for the Government and other local authorities in the process of reform and decentralization implementation” (Rondinelli, 1990).

In the educational system there can be encountered different project categories. All the extracurricular activities can be considered projects because all the requirements of a project are met. The Project Management Institute established the following characteristics for a project:

- a project is temporary meaning that it has a defined beginning and end in time, and therefore defined scope and resources.
- a project is unique that it is not a routine operation, but a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal. So a project team often includes people who don't usually work together – sometimes from different organizations and across multiple geographies.

Some examples of complex projects developed in the educational system are: the curriculum project for designing curricula and materials, the educational project for the development of student's competencies and the institutional development project as a strategic tool for manager's educational policy. Other distinctive categories are the international projects in cooperation with an international organization and the public-private partnership projects for infrastructure development.

The need to work constantly and simultaneously with an increasing number of projects created the circumstances of a new management system, of adopting new techniques, using new tools, reorganize the activities. The specialists described a new type of organization called project-oriented organization. In those institutions a project is considered a strategic option for the organizational design (Gareis and Huemann, 2000). Every school manager should try to attain in his institution high quality activities, efficiency in the decision making process, equity for employees and learners, internationalization for project schools.

2. Leadership and project based school management in Romania

In Romania, the European integration, but also the pre-accession measures allowed teachers to get involved in complex international projects. These projects contributed to teacher's skills improvement and qualification, to increase educational mobility, to develop student's dialogue skills, to foster cooperation and dialogue, to engage in intercultural exchange.

In 2011, as the educational system education moved to decentralization the principal's role became more and more demanding. They are expected to comprehend and interpret the national curriculum guidelines and to provide the necessary leadership for motivating and empowering their teachers, but also to increased personal responsibility as pedagogical leaders.

Moller mentioned in his researches that school leaders are increasingly experiencing a work environment in which contracting, outsourcing, public relations, benchmarking and test scores are taking center stage. Managers are fighting unpredictability, lots of uncertainty, deregulation and managerial accountability. Standards have become almost like a mantra for school reformers and increasingly, in many countries, there is a trend towards developing a culture of performativity (Moller, 2012).

Lifelong learning is considered the key of the social and individual development, therefore an increasing number of countries have included lifelong learning as a goal in their political agenda. The European cooperation concerning Lifelong learning is sustained by the European Commission through programmes as Comenius, Leonardo, Erasmus, Grundtvig, etc.

There are also other types of projects and programmes in the educational sector such as: the Academy of Central European Schools Programmes, the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development financed from the European Social Fund, “START” – Danube Region Project Fund, etc.

We chose to analyze data related to the Lifelong Learning Programme due to its wider distribution in national public schools and the budget allocation. LLP contributes to policy cooperation, innovation, learner mobility and social and work integration. The evolution of the budget allocation for international projects in Romania, under the Lifelong Learning Programme is presented in *Table 1*:

Table 1. The evolution of the Budget allocation for Lifelong Learning Programmes

Year	Budget value (euro)	Evolution
2007	16.960.722	-
2008	21.487.080	+26.68%
2009	25.030.000	+16.48%
2010	25.876.000	+3.38%
2011	27.473.000	+6.17%
2012	30.714.000	+11.79%
2013	35.449.000	+15.41%

(Source: Research on National Agency for Community Programmes in the Field of Education and Vocational Training database: www.llp-ro.ro)

Using international programmes and projects, Romanian schools managers and staff may support their ideas and attain their institutional goals. In Romania, the budget allocation for Lifelong Learning Programme has increased every year, since its opening in 2007. The initial allocation, of 17 million euro, in 2007 was doubled at the end of the Programme, reaching over 35 million euros only in 2013.

In the educational system, the scholars developed a new strategic orientation: the Project Based School Management. It is characterized by the existence of an explicit project management-culture, representing a set of project management-related values and norms. In a school, the project management is considered to be a process, with specific procedures and a common understanding (Gareis and Huemann, 2000).

Project based management promotes distributed and project-specific responsibilities in the organization and uses project portfolio management within the schools in order to coordinate and successfully complete various complex tasks. Since project-based management enables school managers to achieve more effective resource, time, quality, and risk management in schools, all the persons involved in the school management should support the management by projects (Pro-school, 2008).

Project manager leadership style is analyzed in a complex manner by authors such as Muller and Turner (2007), Muller and Turner (2009), Lloyd-Walker and Walker (2011). In their researches it is mentioned that for a long time the project management literature has almost studiously ignored the contribution of project manager, and his or her competence to the success of the project (Muller and Turner, 2007).

Muller and Turner have identified six modern schools of leadership e.g. trait school, behavior or style school, contingency school, visionary or charismatic school, emotional intelligence and competency school. The trait school suggests good leaders exhibit certain traits which they are born with, the behavioral school assumes effective leaders display given behaviors or style, which can be developed. The visionary school identifies two types of leaders, those focusing on relationships and those focusing on process, the emotional intelligence school assumes all managers have a reasonable level of intelligence, the differences between leaders is given by their emotional response and not their intelligence. The competency school encompasses all the previous schools because traits and behaviors are competencies. The school advocates stated that effective leaders exhibit certain competences (Muller and Turner, 2007).

3. Methodology of the research

The data presented in this paper is part of a wider in-progress study concerning the premises of a project based school management in the Romanian public educational system. Our survey has been conducted within six high-schools from Constanta town and the data has been collected in November and December 2013. Our research used a mixed method approach, quantitative data analysis was completed with qualitative data. We used personal distribution of questionnaires because the personal contact allowed us to better communicate with respondents and to obtain a high rate of return.

The research involved 96 teachers from six schools. The schools involved in the research are developing an academic program based on technical or services education and the teachers included in the sample were coordinators or members in an international project team. In the researched area there are 8 schools with academic program based on technical or services education.

3.1. Research methodology

The research methodology includes an analysis of the specialized literature, relevant for the field approached and the results obtained following the application of a questionnaire at six public schools located in the Constanta town. The schools were chosen considering the implication in international projects and the curriculum area approach, specifically technological oriented schools. Before obtaining and analyzing the collected data we have stated partial hypothesis for the research.

Hypothesis 1: The majority of respondents are not aware of the Project based school management approach.

Hypothesis 2: There is a positive relation between manager's leadership competencies and the project based school management approach.

Hypothesis 3: After the decentralization process, school managers developed the leadership competencies necessary for a project based school management.

3.2. Research sample and instruments

The sample included six high schools from Constanta town, providing technological and services educational programs. In the Romanian educational system there can be encountered three main educational branches: theoretical, vocational and technological. There are some differences among these three branches considering curriculum, school relationship with the local businesses and principal competences. The schools principals in the technological branches are in many cases engineers, economists, therefore their competences are different from the principals leading the theoretical and vocational schools with qualifications like social sciences, sports, languages, mathematics, physics, etc.

Regarding the identification of leadership competences in the development of project based school management, the analysis method consists of the results obtained following the application of a questionnaire simultaneously with the constructed conversations with participants, our research used a mix methods approach. The questionnaire has a set of questions addressing issues related to the competences of school principals for a project based school management implementation. The respondents were asked to rate the fifteen leadership competencies after Dulewicz and Higgs as instrument to evaluate the leadership style.

3.3. Results and analysis

Using a five level Likert-type scale, the respondents were asked to rate the leadership competencies necessary to be developed by school managers in the implementation a project based school management. They assigned 5 for strongly agree, 4 for agree, 3 for neither agree nor disagree, 2 disagree and 1 for strongly disagree as answers for their perception on manager's leadership dimension, style and needs of development for a project based school management strategy. We used the fifteen leadership competencies after Dulawicz and Higgs (2003) classified into 3 major groups: emotional competencies, managerial competencies and intellectual competencies. In order to hierarchy and interpret the results we proceeded to calculate the average weight for every evaluated item.

The survey results are summarized below, in table 2, and are providing an analysis of leadership competencies among school principals emphasizing the needs of development for a project based management strategy.

The respondents have agreed that school managers should develop more the managerial competencies along with the intellectual competencies and less the emotional competencies. Currently, school managers can be characterized by conscientiousness and commitment to a course of action, sensitivity and awareness of the other needs, influence and persuasive abilities, self-awareness and control of personal feelings, engaging communication tailored for each audience.

Table 2. Analysis of principal's leadership competencies required for a project based school management

Leadership competency		Average	Evaluation
<i>Emotional competencies</i>		3.27	<i>Medium</i>
1	Motivation to obtain clear results and to make an impact	3.34	Medium
2	Conscientiousness and commitment to a course of action	2.70	Low
3	Sensitivity and awareness of others needs and perception	2.52	Low
4	Influence and persuasive abilities	3.12	Medium
5	Self-awareness and control of personal feelings	3.57	Medium
6	Emotional resilience and abilities in overcoming challenges	3.93	Medium

7	Intuitiveness regarding incomplete and ambiguous information	3.69	Medium
<i>Managerial competencies</i>		4.02	High
8	Efficient organization and coordination of resources	4.13	High
9	Engaging communication tailored for each audience	3.54	Medium
10	Developing others competencies and coaching	4.21	High
11	Empowering and accountability development for every employee		
		4.32	High
12	Achieving objectives and determination in implement decisions	3.89	Medium
<i>Intellectual competencies</i>		3.89	Medium
13	Strategic perspective and critical analysis of opportunities and threats		
		4.17	High
14	Vision and imagination related to future events	3.85	Medium
15	Critical analysis and judgment before taking a decision	3.65	Medium

Source: Adaptation after the fifteen leadership competencies
after Victor Dulewicz and Malcom Higgs (2003)

The results are showing that school managers should focus on managerial competencies. With a group average score of 4.02, the managerial competencies including managing resources, empowering and accountability development for every employee, developing competencies are considered mandatory for school managers in the educational system. The absence of these competencies may be justified by the decision making process characteristics before the decentralization, when the manager's role was limited to some formal actions related to school organization and less to develop other employee competencies or critically analyze opportunities and threats.

With an average group score of 3.27, the emotional competencies are highly rated among school principals. The managers proved to be sensitive and aware of the other needs, conscientious and committed to a course of action. Also, the influence and persuasive abilities are highly evaluated. The respondents have stated that, generally, managers should develop the emotional resilience and abilities in overcoming challenges, but also the intuitiveness regarding incomplete and ambiguous information.

Concerning the managerial competencies, our research revealed that school managers should focus and highly develop abilities in this area. For a project based school management they should empower and engage in developing other competencies and coaching. For every organization, empowering employees may promote innovativeness and personal involvement, improve performances, job satisfaction. This feature of a school leader should be a key objective on his agenda because it may improve employee's initiative, accountability and motivation. Most of the respondents agreed that it is also necessary an efficient organization and coordination of resources and in some cases to engage communication tailored for each audience.

Analyzing the intellectual competencies, the respondents agreed that school managers may need to develop their competencies related to critical analysis and judgment but more important they need to develop the strategic perspective, the vision and imagination related to future events. After the decentralization process, the school managers did not change. The legislative measures are oriented on schools autonomy, but most managers need more time to develop a personal approach and perspective for school progress and growth. The centralized system settled in our country for so many decades left its traces in the educational system, so a major reform in stakeholder's perception and way of action requires some time and effort.

In the qualitative study, school teachers, as members in different project teams, told us that school principal leadership competencies are important in all activities not only in those specific to project development. Some of them mentioned that after the decentralization process the school manager moved from a non-leadership behavior characterized by a dereliction of duty to a new leadership style characterized by inspiring employees to change expectations, perceptions, and motivation to work towards a common goal. This new style of leadership may be categorized by specialists as transformational leadership.

Leadership competences for the project management discipline were highly analyzed by J. Rodney Turner, Ralf Muller and Victor Dulewicz (2009). They studied Intellectual (IQ) competencies, managerial (MQ) competencies and emotional (EQ) competencies that explain the leadership performance of project managers. They conducted several researches from 2006 until 2009. Their analysis results demonstrated the need for clear distinction between leadership performance and follower commitment, and their different expressions in different managerial roles and industries. They stated that their results "support Goleman's (1995) theory that EQ+IQ=success, and extends it into MQ competences" (Turner, et al. 2009). They found that whereas EQ is very important to project management and that project managers require a strong MQ and IQ as well (Lloyd-Walker and Walker, 2011)

4. Conclusions

Our qualitative study revealed that school teachers, as project team member consider leadership competencies important in every activity not only in project management. After the decentralization, the school manager moved from a non-leadership behavior characterized by a dereliction of duty to a new leadership style characterized by inspiring employees to change expectations, perceptions and motivation to work towards common goal. This new style of leadership may be categorized by specialists as transformational leadership.

In the quantitative study the respondents stated that school managers should improve their managerial and intellectual competencies. The respondents could identify some positive characteristics like: conscientiousness and commitment to a course of action, sensitivity and awareness of others needs and perception but also the needs of development like: empowering, coaching and developing others competencies, efficient organization and coordination of resources, strategic perspective and critical analysis of opportunities and threats, emotional resilience and abilities in overcoming challenges.

Our research analysis allowed us to establish the following conclusions regarding the hypothesis. We concluded that the first hypothesis is not supported, school teachers as project team members and coordinators attended courses and workshops concerning project management. The majority of them are familiar with the project management discipline, every school included in the sample has teachers with a wide experience in educational projects.

School managers in order to apply a project based management system should improve their vision and imagination. Also the managers should use more often the empowerment and encourage the employees to take challenges, to solve problems and develop personal accountability. Our research results are contrary Muller and Turner (2007) results. They concluded that strategic perspective and vision are unimportant in project managers. However, our analysis referred to a manager of a project based school management and this position requires strategic perspective and vision more than it is necessary for an individual project manager.

We concluded that the second hypothesis may be supported, the existence of certain leadership competencies may contribute to establish a Project based school management system. School managers emotional competencies are highly connected to the integrated project management competences requirements. In this category some improvements should be made related to emotional resilience and intuitiveness of school manager.

Regarding the managerial competencies, the school principal should improve the managing resources abilities. As mentioned by the Project Management Institute, for a successful project development, a manager should efficiently use the amount of available resources and deliver on-time, on-budget results, learning and integration that organizations need.

Regarding the third hypothesis, our research allowed us to establish that the statement considering a relationship between the decentralization process and the leadership competencies development is not supported. The decentralization process has determined some changes considering the decision making process and the local stakeholders implication. Manager's competencies and the school board managerial approach are still arranging according to the legal changes. Considering the responsibility transfer to the local administration new managerial styles are expected to be developed among school principals. They can influence their school's development, they can contribute to school orientation towards international cooperation and efficient student's labor market inclusion.

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